

Meaningful dialogue urged between Thanksgiving groups

By Robert Knox
MPG Newspapers

PLYMOUTH — In a public statement on the Day of Mourning, Pilgrim Society board member Russell Peters calls for Pilgrim descendants and Wampanoags to renew a meaningful dialogue about the past and more honest future.

While the statement does not directly address last year's Day of Mourning demonstration, which led to the arrests of 25 protesters, it deals with the underlying causes behind the event most local leaders consider a public relations black eye for the town. It also comes at a time when many non-Indians have come to the view that the town should deal more honestly with its Native American history.

Peters' statement is available on Pilgrim Hall's new website (www.pilgrimhall.org). In addition to his connection with the venerable Pilgrim Society, he has credentials that other town leaders don't have. He is a Wampanoag and the president of the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Tribal council. He's also been a member of the US Commission on Civil Rights and is connected with state and federal government organizations and with Harvard's Peabody Museum.

His statement traces the roots of the National Day of Mourning, which began when Wampanoag Frank James was invited by the state to speak at the 1970 Thanksgiving festival and then disinvited when it was learned that his speech was critical of the Pilgrims and white treatment of Native Americans. Peters calls this a "missed opportunity for dialogue" and states, "I commend Frank for taking the stand that he took... It was not appropriate for the native people to feast in thanksgiving..."

His statement describes the positive actions of the Wampanoag people have taken in recent years to reclaim their own history. The Mashpee Wampanoag tribal council has a tribal roll of 1,200 members, conducts daily business and held its annual Pow Wow in July. It maintains the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian Museum and plans to expand it. It is actively revitalizing the language "taken from us by the colonists," conducting research and writing Wampanoag history, "particularly concerning the relationship with the English" and other Europeans from the early seventeenth century up to the present.

How the dialogue that Peters calls "overdue" will be undertaken isn't specified in the statement. It's a

While only one of eight paragraphs in Peters' statement mentions the UAINE (the United American Indians of New England), the group responsible for the Day of Mourning protests, Peters' statement raises the question of the group's right to speak for Native Americans.

formula town leaders, from the board of selectmen to the town's history groups, seem to be searching for. Would discussions between Plymouth civic and historical groups and the revitalized Mashpee tribal council consider ways for Wampanoags to play a new role in the town's civic festivals and historic displays?

While only one of eight paragraphs in Peters' statement mentions the UAINE (the United American Indians of New England), the group responsible for the Day of Mourning protests, Peters' statement raises the question of the group's right to speak for Native Americans. "This group has tenuous ties to any of the local tribes," he writes, "and is composed mainly of non-Indians." He also states that it has refused invitations to meet with Wampanoag tribal councils. "Once again," he concludes, Wampanoags "found our voices and concerns cast aside in the activities surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday in Plymouth, this time, ironically, by a group purporting to represent our interests."

The statement appears to widen the question of how talks on the Plymouth-Native American relationship should be conducted. If the town's mainstream establishment seriously wishes to address the injustices raised by the Day of Mourning, and not just get through Thanksgiving without another disaster, who should it be talking to?